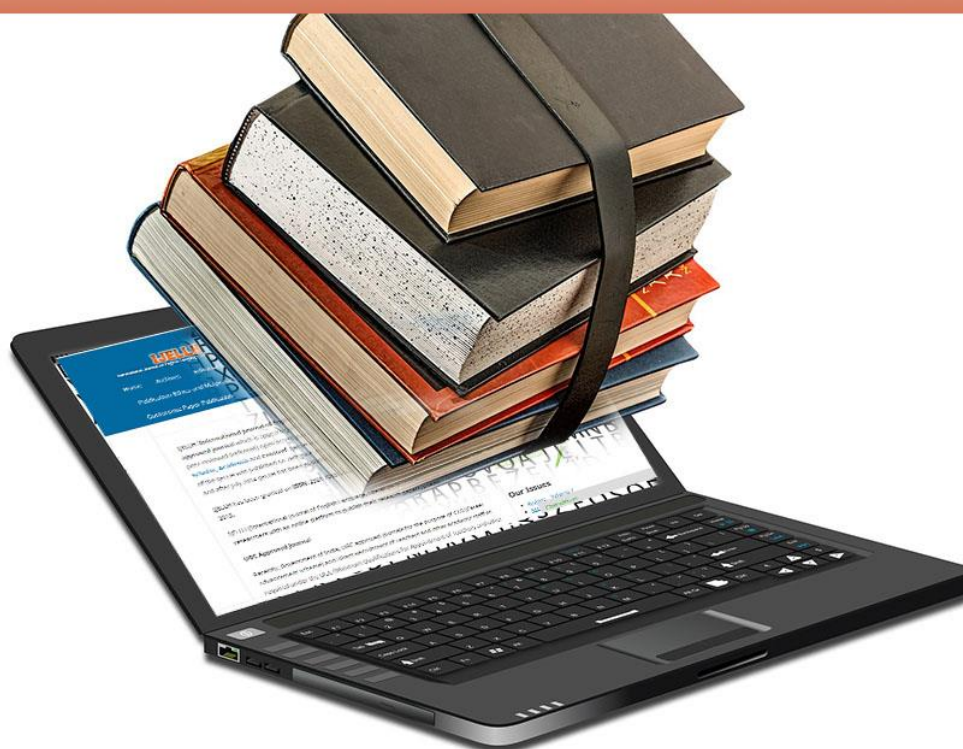


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### Meatless Days: A Faithful Chronicle of the Rise of Fundamentalism

#### Abstract

The paper seeks to examine how the well-known memoir, *Meatless Days*, written by the acclaimed writer and critic, Sara Suleri Goodyear, contributes to our understanding of fundamentalism and the way it grips society and family, especially in postcolonial countries like India and Pakistan. It is an attempt to analyse how Sara Suleri, an American author who was born and brought up in Pakistan, has enriched postcolonial studies by exposing the invisible intricacies of the unholy nexus between language, cultural discourses and power. The paper explores *Meatless Days* as a classic of postcolonial literature that tells the tragic-comic tale of what happens when fundamentalist forces go on a rampage and take over power, destroying the secular, democratic and pluralist framework of a country. The paper studies *Meatless Days* as a rare piece of autobiographical work that sheds light on the deep and lasting impact of religious fundamentalism not only on society but also on everyday life and lays bare the complicity of all commonplace things that appear innocent and uninfluenced by the game of power and culture.

Keywords – Expatriate, fundamentalism, hybridity, memoir, postcolonialism.

## 1. Introduction

The paper seeks to study how the political and economic contours of a nation are drawn and redrawn when fundamentalism starts spreading its tentacles, how the social and cultural psychology undergoes tectonic changes, and how the entire human psyche experiences vast changes. There are several writers who have tried to chronicle the beginning of the era of fundamentalism, but the paper argues that Sara Suleri's contribution in this direction is unique. The paper studies *Meatless Days* by Sara Suleri, who is a professor at Yale University, as one such moving saga in which the narrator, through some very personal tales, revisits some of the most trying times in the history of Pakistan. The paper is an attempt to study how a writer tells a tale that is very political and very personal at the same time.

While the first part of the paper lays emphasis on fundamentalism, which tightened its grip on Pakistan, as a global phenomenon, the second part discusses hybridity and cross-cultural exchange as challenges to fundamentalism. The last part of the paper seeks to explore the culture of violence that fuels and feeds fundamentalism.

## 2. Fundamentalism as a Global Phenomenon

*Meatless Days* is the story of a family that falls apart and disintegrates because it is unable to survive the changing political winds of the time. Suleri tries to describe the cost her family, caught in the political crossfire, pays when Pakistan enters the era of fundamentalism. The rise of extremism in Pakistan was not a momentary, isolated happening; it was part of a larger phenomenon – the beginning of the era of fundamentalism, which emerged as a global phenomenon. *Meatless Days* becomes a faithful chronicle of this phenomenon, which constitutes one of the most important chapters of our modern history and herein lies the importance of *Meatless Days*. Well-known literary critic, Neluka Silva, who has done important work on cross-cultural

identities and feminism, encapsulates the defining features of fundamentalism in Pakistan in these words:

The systematic political manipulation of Islam by the ruling classes is symptomatic of the fear of national disintegration and dismemberment. . . . When Zia-ul-Haq seized power in 1977 and imposed martial law, his mission was to convert Pakistan into a Muslim state. He deliberately sought the collaboration of the Jamat-e-Islami. . . . Their extremist views veer towards what Nawal El Sadaawi describes as “the world phenomenon of fundamentalism” which operated under different religious slogans, but is a political movement using God to justify injustices and discriminate among people, nations, classes, sexes, colours and creeds . . . . Religious fundamentalism in whatever form provides a detailed and concrete programme for both individuals and societies. (176)

*Meatless Days* is the story of the rise of fundamentalist forces in Pakistan and the way they change the social psyche. The author constructs a strong analogy between the story of the nation and that of her family in order to tell this story. Suleri’s father was a renowned journalist of Pakistan, who married a Welsh journalist after abandoning his first wife. The self-made and ambitious man, who migrated from India to Pakistan after the partition of India, regarded Jinnah as his father. When new winds started blowing through Pakistan, Zia Ahmad Suleri’s family could not remain unaffected: to the utter dismay of his family members, Sara Suleri’s father, who had been secular in his views all his life, suddenly turned overtly religious; Suleri’s mother, Mair Jones, died in a sudden road accident; Suleri and her siblings decided to leave Pakistan for good; and one of her sisters was murdered. Suleri paints the beginning of these trying and gloomy times and her father’s unexplained hungering for God in these words:

His sudden hungering for God was added to the growing number of subjects about which we, my mother and her daughters, silently decided we had no conversation. We knew there was something other than trying times ahead and would far hold our breath than speculate about what other surprises the era held up its capacious sleeve. Tillat and I decided to quash our dread of waiting around for change by changing for ourselves, before destiny took time to come our way. I would move to America and Tillat to Kuwait and marriage. To both declarations of intention my mother said, “I see” and helped us in our preparations: she knew by then that her eldest son would not return and was prepared to extend the courtesy of change to her daughters, too. We left, and Islam took to the streets, shaking Bhutto’s empire. Mamma and Dadi remained the only women in the house, the one untalking the other unpraying. (16)

### 3. Power, Culture and Language

Suleri does not try to impose any form or structure on the knotty disarray of her experiences and the tangled and chaotic fragments of personal memories, which are interspersed with the memories of political events that shaped the destiny of Pakistan. It is true that like other postcolonial writings, the narrative of *Meatless Days* is also fragmented for the reason correctly explained by the noted critic, Rosemary Marangoly George, “The Experience of unsettlement, loss, and recurring terror produce discrepant temporalities – broken histories that trouble the linear progressive narratives of nation-states and global modernisation” (438). In *Meatless Days*, Suleri keeps jumping back and forth between the present and past. She does not try to give any neat and well-planned structure to the memoir because she feels that reality is never neat and structured (as ideologies would have us believe). The author consciously resists looking at things in the light of an ideology because she knows that giving her tales a neat structure is to fall into

the trap of ideological structures, which are deeply embedded in the nasty game of power in which nothing is unbiased, neutral, or innocent, be it language, meaning, food or culture.

Sara Suleri visits the era of the rise of fundamentalist forces in Pakistan not as a historian or dispassionate observer, but as someone who is part of that history and few have done it as beautifully as Sara Suleri herself has done in her memoirs. In this respect, Suleri can be compared to Salman Rushdie, many of whose writings are an attempt to study the Islamization of Pakistan. In his renowned novel, *Shame*, Rushdie says:

So-called Islamic “fundamentalism” does not spring, in Pakistan, from the people.

It is imposed on them from above. Autocratic regimes find it useful to espouse the rhetoric of faith, because people respect that language, are reluctant to oppose it.

This is how religions shore up dictators; by encircling them with words of power, words which the people are reluctant to see discredited, disenfranchised, mocked.

(251)

The similarity of views between Suleri and Rushdie over Islamic fundamentalism is notable and no wonder, Suleri has been admired by many for what critic Aamir Mufti greatly calls, “Suleri's discussion of Rushdie's simultaneous gesture of loyalty and betrayal towards Islam” (280). Suleri, understandably, identifies with the above-mentioned duality, which finds poignant expression in her writings too. Very much like Rushdie, Suleri interrogates the nexus of power and language and shows that language, meaning, culture, food, all are complicit in the game of power. Nevertheless, Suleri's take on the issue is novel in many ways.

By creating an elaborate and complex metaphor, Suleri shows that crude, naked and even ugly reality becomes acceptable when encircled with words, to borrow Rushdie's expression. In the same way, flesh also becomes consumable when it turns meat. Suleri

draws an extraordinary parallel between language and food in *Meatless Days*. *Meatless Days* has a whole chapter that cooks up humorous and uncommon metaphors of language, reality, food and body, and when dished out, their taste leaves the readers wondering along with the author herself in the end, “What is it, after all, between food and the body?” (37) In *Meatless Days*, food finds special place, so much so that even conversations at home between the sisters become “meals” in the memoir. “Our (the writer and her sister Tillat’s) conversations were meals” (23), the author says. While telling the story of how she became vegetarian, Suleri explores the “organic issue” (22) of the relation between the popular Pakistani meat preparation “Kapur” and the corresponding body organ, testicle. She recalls how the shocking and comical revelation of what Kapur actually was, made her develop deep distaste for meat when she was a child. It was Suleri’s cultural upbringing and education that made her revolt. She realises the mistake when she grew up: “it was wrong to strip a food of sauce and put it back into its bodily belongings” (22).

Everything in *Meatless Days* has layers of meaning. For example, Suleri recalls in the second chapter of the book how her mother made her, “consume as many parts of the world as she would before she set me loose in it” (23). This striking similarity between the two guides Suleri towards the idea that language, like food, is a veritable “game of guile and trust” (24). This idea is thought provoking because it expresses how the author feels “cheated” by language and food. She observes that a well-glazed language, very much like food, makes one consume insipid realities of life in blissful ignorance because it coats them with acceptable meanings/ideas. Language, Suleri believes, makes people develop the “ability to take the world on their tongues” (28). Thus, the author of *Meatless Days*, apprehensive of being beguiled and deceived by language and food, says that the dished out reality, like food, “will not stay discrete but will instead defy our categories of

expectation”. (28) She comments: “I like to order to a plate, and know the great sense of failure that attends a moment when what is potato to the fork is turnip to the mouth” (29).

#### 4. Hybridity as a Challenge to Fundamentalism

*Meatless Days* shows how fundamentalism tries to redraw cultural identities and encourages a fanatic urge to regulate language, education, dress, food, and everything else on religious principles and how hybridity emerges as a challenge to these attempts. The issues of language, identity, and culture find unique expression in the third chapter of the book that introduces us to Mustakori, an immigrant whose pen-portrait gives the readers a rare opportunity to understand cross-cultural experiences. Labelled in Pakistan as the “Brown European” (49), Suleri’s childhood friend, Mustakori had “. . . deep allegiance to the principle of radical separation: mind and body, existence and performance, (which) would never be allowed to occupy the same space of time” (49). The convoluted tale of her past makes her an interesting study. Mustakori’s parents were Asiatics and claimed origin from Indian Punjab and Kashmir, who moved to Tanzania in East Africa after spending some time in Hong Kong. Then, two years after Mustakori’s birth, the family moved to Dublin. Thus, from her birthplace (Arusha), which lies in the shadow of Mount Meru, to Kenya, Pakistan, China and finally America – Mustakori has always been on the move. Suleri remarks:

We felt amazed at how much Fancy’s new life seemed to leave her untainted by experience, as though her wisdom consisted in remaining pure of any knowledge that travel pretended to confer. Chinese joined the company of Urdu and Swahili and French, languages which Mustakori had once shaken hands with which she somehow never developed an intimate relationship. (66)

Mustakori is for Suleri a classic example of being culturally uprooted and homeless. Suleri ends her tale by explaining Mustakori’s final “continental shift” to America where,



“if not actually roots, then she has certainly begun to dangle filaments from her elbows and her wrists, like a gnarled but baby banyan tree” (71). The fact that Mustakori has immigrated to America, makes Suleri hopeful that she will gradually develop from “swampy nothing” into a land where people would “build an airport on you” (70).

Just like the nation, *Meatless Days* has a whole galaxy of characters that are in flux. We find them journeying either towards or away from Pakistan. If Sara Suleri, her friend Mustakori, her brother Shahid, her sister Tillat leave Pakistan, there are characters like her mother and father who choose to stay there and breathe their last, and those like Sara’s beautiful sister, Ifat, who rebel against her family and try to “enter the heart of Pakistan in the most un-Pakistani way possible” [28] and are eventually devoured by the remote and semi-barbaric world that still breathes in the dark abysses of present-day Pakistan. The making of modern nations has been a complex process in countries like India and Pakistan where feudal hangovers, irrationality, and half-baked modernity co-exist and create an ideal breeding ground for the rise of fundamentalism. Ifat’s story sheds light on this dark underbelly of postcolonial countries.

##### 5. Culture of Violence helps Fundamentalism Grow

Modern postcolonial cultures are essentially cultures of violence and if violence is ingrained in a culture, fundamentalism is bound to grow. Thus, violence becomes a recurring theme in *Meatless Days*, which is a powerful attempt to reveal the stark difference between appearance and reality. Suleri tries to bring to light even those forms of violence, which are not physical, but subtler, masked or invisible. By shedding light on the hidden element of violence that underlies a relationship as innocuous as that of two sisters, Suleri tries to underscore the fact that violence lurks even behind things that seem completely non-violent to us. Thus, sisterly love is not as innocent as it often seems to be, Suleri seems to suggest. The message is simple – reality is deceptive and violence has

many subtle forms. While describing how a quarrel between Suleri and one of her sisters, which took a sudden violent turn, changed her perception about the innocence of love between sisters, Suleri says, “Till then we had associated violence with all that was outside us, as though somehow the more history fractured, the more whole we would be. But we began to lose that sense of differentiated identities of history and ourselves and became guiltily aware that we had known it all along, our part in the construction of unreality. (13-14)

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up the questions discussed in the paper, *Meatless Days* is an important contribution to postcolonial literature and essential for understanding the postcolonial world because it shows how fundamentalism is altering not only the political, but also the cultural and social contours of the postcolonial world. *Meatless Days* offers an intimate study of fundamentalism and shows how it makes its way in a postcolonial country like Pakistan and redefines the nexus of power and culture.

*Meatless Days* stands out from other works of fiction as a brilliant attempt at uncovering the role of language in what Suleri calls the construction of unreality. To conclude, *Meatless Days* upholds the liminal space that problematizes rigid notions regarding cultural identity and sweeping definitions regarding nationalism and religious ethics.

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